

# Overland Monthly

A black and white photograph showing a large bell being moved by a man. The bell is suspended by a wooden frame and is being lowered or raised. A man in a dark suit and cap is standing to the right, holding a rope that is attached to the bell. The background is a dark, textured wall.

January, 1912

15 Cents



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*Lincoln item.*

# HOW I LOST ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS

An Incident in the Trial of One of the Conspirators who plotted the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

BY COL. CHARLES H. BLINN

ON THE nineteenth day of November, 1864, I was mustered out of the service of the United States as a private soldier in Company A, First Regiment, Vermont Cavalry. I had served three years and four months during the Rebellion. I had seen grim war in all its varied phases; had been in some of the great battles; in many of the long marches and campaigns of the Army of the Potomac; had been a prisoner of war at Lynchburg and Belle Island, and was more than willing to quit.

The Battle of Cedar Creek was fought on the nineteenth of October, 1864, and the great victory of Sheridan (snatched from the defeat of Wright, in the early morning when he was driven back several miles) presaged the collapse of the Rebellion. All the winter of 1864, Grant was hammering away at Petersburg. Sherman was making that wonderful march to the sea, and Thomas had sealed the fate of Hood at the Battle of Nashville. The mighty Mississippi was flowing, unvexed, to the sea. The armies of the South were exhausted and discouraged, illy fed, illy clothed, and without hope of further recruiting. Every evidence was in the air that the inevitable end was rapidly approaching.

On the 6th of April, 1865, the greatest General of the Confederacy, Robert E. Lee, disheartened and broken in spirit, and weary-worn, heard the immortal Grant utter, under the apple-tree of Appomatox, the expression,

"Let us have Peace."

The dark cloud of war which had hung over the country for four years had been pierced by the angel of peace. Beneath the daisies were sleeping, careless of the voice of the morning, three hundred thousand men. On crutches and with empty sleeves were a half million more. Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Cold Harbor, Antietam, Shiloh, the Wilderness and Chickamauga, were forever recorded in history, the cause of which one side believed, and the other side knew was right, while over all the bloody years was written the word "Silence."

In the midst of the rejoicing, while church bells were clanging and bands were playing the anthem of peace, the great master-mind, the supreme leader, Abraham Lincoln, was assassinated. Gloom fell upon the land. A diabolical plot to murder the President, Vice-President, Secretaries Seward, Stanton and others, was laid bare to the appalled country. The plot of the malefactors was as follows: John Wilkes Booth was assigned to murder the President; Lewis Powell, alias Payne, to murder Secretary Seward (Payne was a deserter from a Florida regiment of the Confederate Army); George Atzerodt, a Confederate spy, was to murder Vice-President Andrew Johnson; David E. Herold, a young drug clerk, was assigned as a page for Booth. Others in the conspiracy were Samuel Arnold and Michael O'Laughlin, Confederate soldiers, and John H. Surratt. The plot was hatched at the

house of Mary E. Surratt, mother of John.

The conspirators, except Booth, who was shot ten days later, and John H. Surratt, who escaped, were tried by a military court, and in May, Mrs. Surratt, Payne, Herold and Atzerodt were hanged.

After the close of the war, I entered the Vermont Central Railroad office at Burlington. My duties were performed at night. The Government had offered one hundred thousand dollars' reward for the capture of any one of the assassins. My work being at night, and in a railroad office, I was constantly on the watch for suspicious characters, and yet not so efficaciously on the watch as I imagined.

The station in which I was employed was at the wharf, and not at the regular passenger depot. The ice in Lake Champlain broke up about the middle of April. On the 16th the first steamer of the season arrived. The landing was made at about two o'clock in the morning.

When the gang-plank was run out, one solitary passenger came ashore and walked into the station. He was a tall, rather thin man, his throat tightly muffled, his complexion pale and sickly. A bright fire was burning in the stove, which he approached eagerly and with out-stretched hands. Then he turned to me and asked politely if I had any objection to his remaining in the station until his train left for Montreal, over the Canadian border at four o'clock, two hours later.

"It is against our rules, sir," I said, "to allow passengers to remain in the station." I hesitated as I spoke, for the man looked weary and half-sick, and it was some distance to the depot in the town.

The stranger made further appeal to remain, explaining that he was on his way home from a hospital where he had been confined for many months with a severe illness. In interesting detail, he related some of his experiences, and his story sounded so plausible that my sympathy was aroused, and I consented to his remaining,

though the station was a freight instead of a passenger depot. In thanking me, he explained "that it was good to get home again," meaning that Canada was "home." In spite of his fatigue, he held my attention for some time with a lively account of his experience "in the States." His manner was cordial and friendly, his conversation very entertaining, his whole demeanor that of a gentleman. He finally stretched himself on the hard bench in the room, as if exhausted, though he continued talking good-naturedly, with his head resting on his arms. I went into the office, and on my return saw that he had fallen asleep. The man had made such an appealing impression on me that I tip-toed about my duties, with caution, lest I should awaken him. In repose, he looked emaciated and sick, and his wretched appearance really bore out his story that he had just come from a hospital. I aroused him, with some pity, when the train pulled in. He awoke, as I remembered afterwards, in much agitation. The startled and scared expression which crossed his face for a second I can still see.

It was day-break when I finished my station duties and prepared to go home. In crossing the outer office, a bit of white under the bench caught my eye, and I stooped and picked up a handkerchief. I was startled to see clearly written across its corner the name "John H. Surratt," the man at whose mother's house the plot to assassinate Lincoln had been hatched.

Quicker than wind I flew to the telegraph office, and sent the following message:

"Carrol T. Hobart, Conductor, Montreal Express, St. Albans, Vt.—John H. Surratt on your train. \$100,000 reward. Answer.

"CHAS. H. BLINN."

The breathless anxiety of the next half hour can be better imagined than expressed, but the answer finally came:

"Train crossed the border fifteen minutes ago."

Thus went glimmering the basis of what doubtless would have made me to-day a second Rockefeller.

John H. Surratt entered a monastery near Montreal, where he remained for six months.

He then fled to Europe, where, two years later, he was discovered by detectives who had scoured the world for him. He was serving on the Papal Guard at Rome, and was apprehended, extradited and brought to the United States in a war vessel, June, 1867.

The trial took place at Washington. I was subpoenaed to attend, and journeyed from St. Albans, Vermont, to do so. On my arrival, the leading counsel for Surratt sent for me and offered a large sum of money if I would change my testimony and the date of my meeting with Surratt to a later date. I declined the offer. After waiting more than three weeks in

Washington, I was called to the witness stand.

More than two weeks were consumed in obtaining a jury, which, when selected, was a motley lot; an unbiased person would have declared they would never agree on a conviction. Surratt had changed very little since I saw him at the railroad station in Vermont. He was ably defended by Judge Richard T. Merrick, one of the best known lawyers of his time. The trial dragged for nearly two months, and after two days' deliberation the jury disagreed.

The war bitterness of two years before had in a certain sense been melted by time, and the fact that the prisoner's mother had been hanged with the other conspirators had influenced public opinion to a degree. Surratt was admitted to bail, and after a year or more the case was dropped from the calendar, and doubtless from memory.

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## GLORY GOLD

BY EFFIE McDOWELL DAVIES

A ropin' contest at the Fair,  
With bands a-playin' loud and fast.  
And cowboys loomin' everywhere.  
The ropes are swingin' now at last,  
For we are out for Glory Gold!

Your lined-back steer is on his side,  
Then lose no time to mount your grey—  
"Twenty seconds—roped and tied,"  
Is what you hear the judges say.  
Gee, how you ache for Glory Gold!

And yonder is The Girl, whose eyes  
Shine proudly, as you gallop by;  
And from the grandstand cheers arise.  
The purse is yours. Whoop-ee—Kei-yi,  
And every dollar's Glory Gold!

